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Folk Magic Powwow: History and Practices

The folk magic powwow is not the same as the Native American ritual

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The Antrim Mennonite Choir performs near Ground Zero during the memorial ceremony marking the anniversary of the terrorist attacks September 11, 2002 in New York City.
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By **Patti Wigington**

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Powwow, also known as *braucher*, is a form of folk magic and healing remedies which originated in Pennsylvania among the people of German descent. This collection of rituals, charms, and traditional medicine was born in Europe, and came to Pennsylvania with early settlers during America's colonial period.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Key Takeaways: Powwow



- Pennsylvania Dutch powwow is a blend of folk magic, healing remedies, and Christian theology.
- The word *powwow* comes from an Algonquian word that refers to healing.
- Charms and spells are used for protection, healing, and many other needs, from mundane requests such as protecting cattle, to medical emergencies like bleeding and even legal

troubles.

- Today's powwow practitioners learn via oral traditions, but they are only taught to students who plan to use them to help others. There's a taboo against accepting payment for work.

Powwow Definition

Although the words are similar, the folk magic practice of powwow is not the same as the Native American practice of powwow, which is a social event bringing together people of different backgrounds for celebrations, rituals, song, and dance. Interestingly, both Native American powwow and the Pennsylvania Dutch folk magic practice of powwow have the same etymology. The word *powwow* itself originated with the Algonquian nation, and refers to a curative, healing ritual. Today, some practitioners use the word *braucher* to avoid confusion with the Native American terminology.

History and Origins of Powwow

In the 17th century, most of the people living in the area that is now Pennsylvania were Native Americans. Tribes like the Algonquian Lenape and the Iroquois Kentatentonga and Susquehannock were indigenous to the region, and other groups like the Shawnee and Mohawk occasionally made their way into the territory. By 1700 or so, that all had changed; both the Dutch and the English tried to lay claim to the lands on either side of the Delaware River.

During the late 17th century and on into the 18th, settlers from Europe poured into the area, claiming land along what was then the frontier. Many of these new arrivals were German-speaking, and some had fled religious persecution in their home countries. They brought with them a number of different religious traditions; although many of them were staunch Lutherans and Protestants, there were also Amish, Mennonites, and Anabaptists. After settling in eastern Pennsylvania, they became known as the Pennsylvania Dutch, or Pennsylvania German community. They weren't truly Dutch, like people from the Netherlands; instead, the use of Dutch is an adaptation of *Deutsch*, which means *German*.

Many of the practices these settlers brought with them were religious traditions with origins from the period prior to the Reformation. They venerated the saints of the Roman Catholic Church and used prayers and liturgical blessings for everyday activities. When it came to matters of healing, they often included consecrated objects and invocations in tandem with herbal remedies. Sacred symbols were invoked for protection; this can still be seen today in the hex signs that adorn many barns.

As these new settlers on the frontier came into contact with their Native American neighbors, the word *powwow*, which referred to a trance-like healing ritual, was adopted and applied to the folk traditions that they practiced. In the early 1800s, a book entitled *Pow-Wows: or, Long Lost Friend* was published by John George Hohman, who had collected a series of charms, folk remedies, spells, and talismans. This book became one of the key foundations of powwow practice in Pennsylvania.

Practices and Beliefs

In powwow, perhaps the most valuable text a practitioner can have on

nana is the Bible. The theory is that healing magic comes from God, and therefore use of scripture for healing is the only truly Christian way to practice magical folk remedies. Many charms and spells included in powwow have their origins in the practice of medieval European Catholics, who often used them to protect themselves against malevolent witchcraft. Other literature used for reference includes Hohman's book, and esoteric works like [The Sixth and Seventh Books of Moses](#) and [Romanus-Büchlein](#).

Charms and spells found in powwow include some of the following:

- To protect cattle, mix up a blend of wormwood, asafetida, and other herbs with soil from your stable and some salt. Combine these in a fabric pouch and bury it under the threshold to your barn where the cattle enter and exit. This will keep them safe from theft and disease.
- To treat a fever, turn your shirt inside out for three mornings in a row. As you do, say, "Turn thou, shirt, and fever likewise turn. I tell thee this in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." After the third day, the fever will subside.
- If you are going to court and want a favorable outcome, write the words "I appear before the house of the Judge. Three dead men look out of the window; one having no tongue, the other having no lungs, and the third sick, blind and dumb" on a piece of paper. Carry it in your pocket as you go to court, and repeat the incantation before you see the judge.
- To stop bleeding, breathe upon the injured person three times, and recite the Lord's Prayer three times, stopping when you get to the words *upon the earth*.
- Powwow practices can also be used to cure warts and burns, prevent theft, or even compel a thief to return stolen goods. In addition, homes and people can be protected from harm.

Today, many people still practice powwow; practitioners are sometimes referred to as *Braucherin* if they're female, or *Braucher* if they are male. Among some Pennsylvania Dutch communities, practitioners are simply called the "powwow doctor" or "powwower." Traditional powwow is passed along as part of an oral tradition, taught from male practitioners to female and vice versa. In general, powwow practices are only taught to students who plan to use them to help others.

[Pennsylvania German powwower Rob Phoenix](#) says there are a few rules in the tradition that must always be followed. First, no powwower ever reveals the name of the person who brought them to powwow. He also says that if you don't believe in the Christian God or follow the Bible, powwow probably isn't for you—after all, its roots are in Judeo-Christian theology. Finally, Phoenix says that there's a taboo against accepting payment for work.

Many of the prayers, rituals, and charms are memorized rather than formally written down, and most experienced powwowers will only share them with those who feel called to use their God-given abilities to heal and protect their community.

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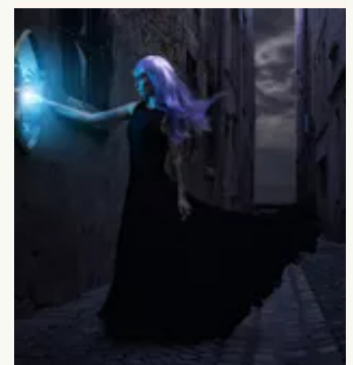
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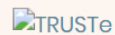
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